MORGAN

Noah and Isaac Miracle Plays

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A STUDY

of the

NOAH AND ISAAC MIRACLE PLAYS:

WITH REFERENCE TO THEIR

SOURCES AND ANACHRONISMS

by

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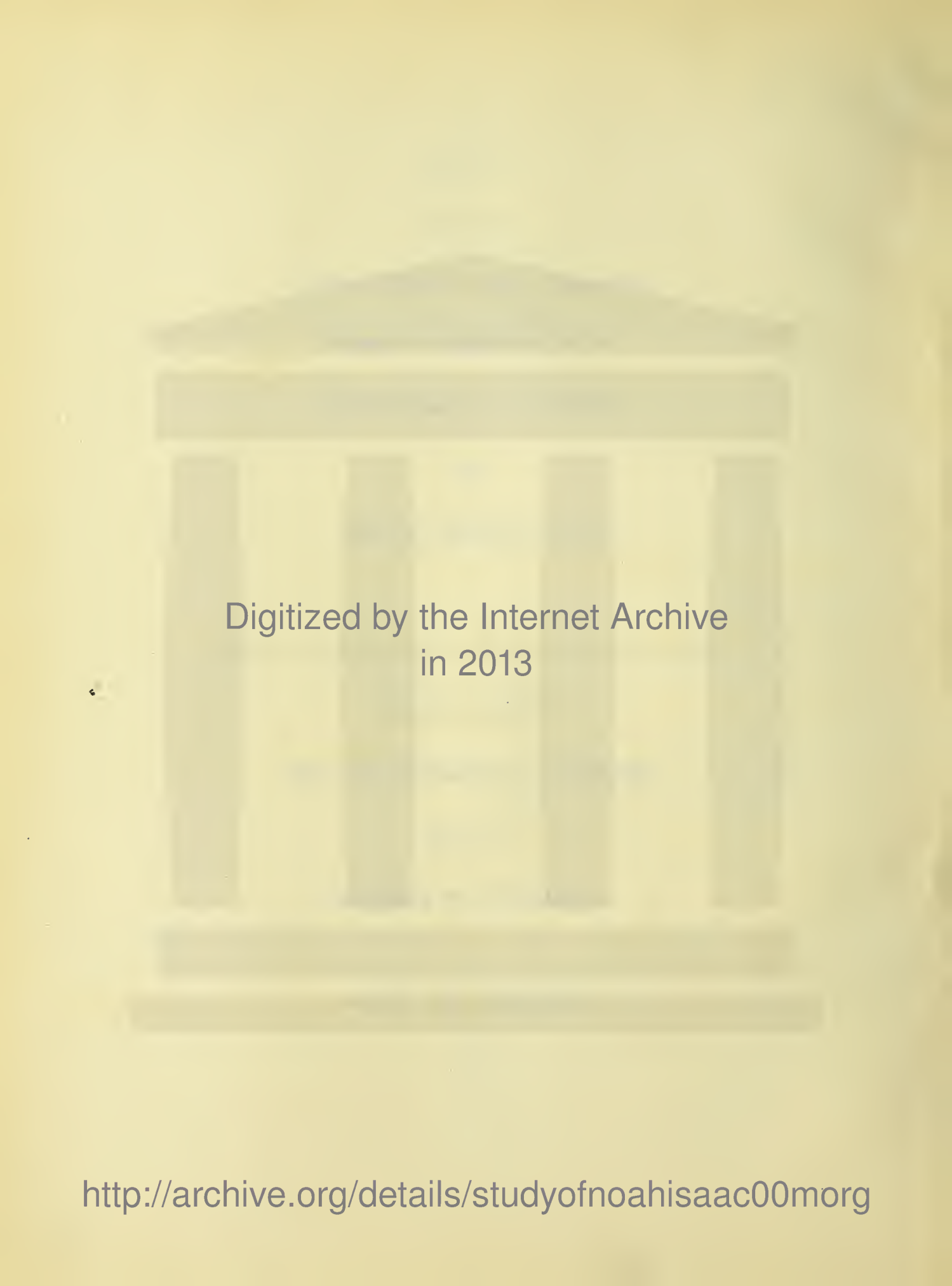

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THIS IS TO CERTIFY THAT THE THESIS PREPARED UNDER MY SUPERVISION BY

Stella Webster Morgan

ENTITLED A Study of the Noah and Isaac Miracle Plays: with reference to their Sources and Anachronisms

IS APPROVED BY ME AS FULFILLING THIS PART OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE

OF Bachelor of Arts

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HEAD OF DEPARTMENT OF the English Language & Literature.

Introduction.

The Miracle Cycles, pulsing with the strong life of medieval Christendom, uncouth in detail, oftentimes tedious in speech, dropping perhaps from the sublime to the ridiculous, yet have a sweep of outline and a majesty of theme, which, teeming with the mighty, passionate conflict of the human heart, present in bold relief and with life-like reality man, devil, and God. There are present, not merely the shapeless elements of the drama, but the drama itself, colossal, crude, magical in its power to hold and sway its audience--as vast, turbulent, and passionate as itself.

The literary sources are found in the Vulgate; the Apocryphal Gospels; the Legends of the Saints; and the vast body of traditional literature which had grown up about them. The charm, however, lies, not in any conscious literary rendering, but in the simple, English-yoeman, traditional interpretation of the central theme of each play. And so it is, that the greatest interest attaches to the customs and manner of thought of the English guilds of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, the strong individualization of each cycle being determined by the natural bias of the guilds in charge of its presentation.

The comparison of the cycles makes apparent their unity of design. The subjects taken from biblical history are presented in due sequence, the proportion of Old Testament subjects being about one-fourth or one-fifth of the entire number. There is also in many instances something of an onomatopoetic significance in the selection of the guild for each play. Thus in the York pageants, the creation was presented by the plasterers; the building of the ark, by the shipwrights; the voyage of the ark, by the fish mongers and mariners; while the Magi were represented by the goldbeaters, the supper at

Cana by the vintners, and the last supper by the bakers.

The York Cycle, in its themes and general treatment, bears a striking resemblance to the great 14th century poem, Cursor Mundi, supposed to be written in honor of Mary. The York plays offer a closer parallel to the poem than do the other collections, both in comprehensiveness, and in freedom from coarseness. The date of the York Cycle seems to be between 1340 & 1350, or, in other words, soon after the "Cursor Mundi". Throughout this cycle, there is manifest a skill of versification which lifts the play decidedly above the usual alliterative level of the times; for alliteration was still popular, though somewhat relieved by French rime. From the careful concordance of the narrative with the scriptures, it would seem that the author must have belonged to one of the religious brotherhoods of Yorkshire. In verse and style, this cycle compares favorably with the Middle English poetry of the North. Perhaps the strongest indication that the York sequence is a native product lies in its exceedingly varied metrical form; for the verse of the French Mysteries is uniformly regular. There is also a successful attempt to suit the metre to the theme.

The Townley Cycle presents an arrangement of stanzas less uniform than the prevailing twelve-line stanza of the York Cycle. The most regular plans here, are those of the 8-line and 9-line stanzas; the former being illustrated by the Isaac play, and the latter, by the Noah play. The 8-line-stanza plays are characteristically dull and plodding. There can hardly be a greater contrast, than between the monotony of these plays and the overflowing humour and allusion of the plays of the 9-line-stanza. The many references to music in the latter, the bits of Latin, and the daring cleverness of phrase, are vividly suggestive of the honest rollicking Friar who must have

been their fitting author. Considering the limitations restricting his work, his dramatic effects are extremely good. This metre,--the 9-line stanza,--is found in five plays of considerable length, which seem, therefore, to have been the work of the same writer, who assuredly was not responsible for the duller work of the cycle, and whose genius marks him as highly superior to his contemporary playwrights. There is also conclusive evidence that five other of the remaining twenty-five plays of the Towneley Sequence, are borrowed from the York Cycle. The Towneley Cycle, then, is a composite collection of the work of three different authors, extending over some fifty years, or until about 1410.

There has been much discussion concerning the origin of the Chester Plays. Some authorities have claimed that they were merely translated from the French, but the more prevalent opinion is that they are the original work of an English writer, probably of one Ralph Higden, monk of Chester, with whom tradition connects them. While there are numerous points of likeness between these plays and certain of the early 16th century French Mysteries, yet, in so large a mass, these similarities are hardly so numerous or so significant as to indicate either adaptation or translation from the French. The date of the original manuscript, from which the five copies now extant were transcribed, is supposed to be the latter part of the fourteenth, or early in the fifteenth century.

The Hegge Plays are characterized by a blending of biblical and legendary treatment, but with the biblical predominating. There is a seriousness of purpose that is almost wearisome; a strong tendency toward worship of the Virgin; and by the introduction of abstract characters, the Moralities are foreshadowed. The versification is monotonous, and only at rare intervals relieved by a touch of poetry

or of tragedy.

The constant recurrence of anachronistic references throughout the Miracle text, seems strangly ineffective and flat to our modern taste. But this feature of the plays must have seemed good to their medieval audience, else they would not be so persistently prevalent. And so for a clear understanding of the situation, it is necessary that the reader put himself as far as possible in the condition of the English yoemanry of the 14th and 15th centuries. To the rustic mind, there was possible no conception of the Deity save in the three-fold significance taught by the Church. Hence, the frequent references to the Trinity added to the impressiveness of the moral teaching, and heightened the dramatic effect. There are five such references in the Towneley Noah:

"Thre persons withouten nay, oone god in endles blis."-line 8.

"I made hym to be

"All angels abuf like to the trynyte."-line 83.

"I am god most mighty,

Oone god in trynyte."-lines 168-169.

"In nomini patris, filii,

Et spiritus sancti, Amen."-line 252.

"I traw from the trynyte socoure will be send."-line 254.

In the Hegge Flood play, there is a similar reference:

"I xal kepe from alle trespace,...

.....Be help of the Trynyte."

The following are taken from the Brome Play:

"Dere Fader, God in trinyte."-l. 58.

"I am here,

And make my prayrys to the Trenyte."-line 104.

"Thow schall thys day dey for me,

In the worchup of the holy Trynyte."-ls. 360-1.

"Lord God of heven in Trynyte,

All-myty God omnipotent."-ls. 383-4.

The names of Christ, Peter, and John occur frequently in impatient interjectional phrases, evidently without the slightest thought of irreverence. In this connection, the many English expressions of surprise should be noted, bits of local color whose very familiarity made them acceptable to the throng;

"Putt off, harro, & wele-away:

We ! ho ! out upon the ! ma fa ! ma fay!

The Noah plays contain frequent references to spinning, and many technical terms are used in the building of the ark. Bits of Latin quotation from the Vulgate occur in some of the plays. The Towneley Flood contains a reference to the fall of Lucifer, the exact source of which is unknown. The legend itself is of Iranian origin. In the York play, Noah speaks of the final destruction of the world by fire; this, also, may be referred to the Iranian legends.

The Noah Plays.

The plays of the York Cycle give evidence of not a little dramatic feeling and imagination on the part of the author. This is especially true of the two Noah plays: 'The Building of the Ark' and 'The Flood and Its Waning'. The first play serves as a sort of dialogistic prologue to the second. To say that the style of the opening speech of Deus is dramatically effective in its high simplicity, is but to state particularly what is generally true of this cycle,--the treatment of Deus throughout the forty-eight plays being of 'befitting gravity and seriousness'. The doom of middle-earth and its sinful creatures being thus pronounced by Deus, the dramatic action--such as it is--is begun by the dialogue between Deus and Noah. This is made realistic by the attitude of the patriarch: at first he stands amazed, doubtful almost whether he has heard aright, wondering what must be done, dimly aware of the crisis impending. Recalled to himself, he hastens to show by all due acknowledgment and praise, his realization of the great honor shown him by this revelation. Commanded to build the ark, he pleads his great age and complete unfitness for the task. Assured of divine help and strength he accepts the trust with simple faith--although the way is still obscure, as he is wholly unskilled of 'shippe-craft'. Noah now finds that, notwithstanding his five hundred years, his weakness has been made strength. The dimensions of the ark having been given in detail, there follows a crude representation of the actual work done: a board is hewn, bolted, cemented, and clenched. From this bare suggestion, the spectators must picture for themselves the century-long undertaking. That they were equal to the task is evident from the fact that there seems to have been no realization of unnaturalness or discrepancy in Noah's statement that a hundred years have

been passed in this wise; nor is there any indication that the recitative was interrupted from end to end of this miraculous century. Much of the dramatic effect and value--indeed the greater part--is thus made dependent upon the receptive and imaginative attitude of the people. The play itself presents the most cursory outline. Here, then, in this crude representation, there is present in marked degree a dramatic element upon which depend much of the effectiveness and power of the dramatic masterpieces of all time: the ability to carry the people with the play, to make them a direct part of it, to vitalize the action in them and through them, as well as before their eyes. With the final directions for the fitting of the ark and the gathering therein of the animals, the representation, as given by the shipwrights, closes.

The story of the Flood and its Waning is now taken up by the 'Fysshers and Marynors'. Owing to the greater number of persons involved, this play is more elaborate than the preceding one, and the dialog is more effective and dramatic. That this is so is due largely to the simple realistic touches, as when Noah's wife yields to her curiosity to go and see what it all means; again, later, when she pleads, woman-like, to go and pack up her things; and then in the simple naturalness of Noah's directions to his sons and daughters-in-law for the care of the 'cattle' and fowls. The affectionate and beautiful relationship of the sons to the father, is also worthy of note. In direct contrast, is the unwillingness of Noah's wife to leave the dry land and all her old friends and neighbors. This farcical situation, her objection to being saved on such short notice, is not so pronounced, however, as to interfere with the general tone of the play. The incident happily is free from the tendency to jocularity and the vulgarity of the Towneley Play.

The characterization of Noah's wife is very effective and sympathetic. She alone seems to grieve for those who have been lost in the flood. Poor soul! it was hard lines that she should be kept in ignorance of what her husband was doing lo, these hundred years--and then expected to be ready to 'flit' at a moment's notice, without good-bye to her gossips, or so much as 'trussing' her 'tolis' Her inflexible husband gives her scant sympathy, and meets her irrepressible grief with a curt command, "Late be thy dyne". It is a very graphic picture of the old patriarch, steadfast and unshakable in his uprightness, the sturdy sons that follow him without question, the daughters appealing to him in their trouble, and the wife--the most human and impulsive of them all. Is it strange that, impatient of her husband's domineering ways, she gives him a 'clowte' for 'qwittes'?

There is a beautiful lyric suggestion in the description of the 'waxing clere of the cloudes', and the sending forth of the dove. Then God sets

"...his senge full clere
Uppe in þe Ayre of heght".

the waters abate, and Noah leads forth his little flock to the repeopling of the earth.

The Towneley plays present perhaps the best instance of the interweaving of comic and miracle elements. These plays so essentially popular in character, appealing directly to the tastes of the crowd, are strikingly effective in dramatic vivacity and original humour. The Flood play opens with an invocational prologue in which Noah sorrows over the world's sinfulness:

"Therfor I drede lest God on us will take veniance
ffor sin is now alod without any repentance".

There is a very effective touch in the verse here:

"And now I wax old,
Seke, sory, and cold,
As muk apon mold
I widder away".

In the speech of Deus which follows, there is an infinite pathos in the words:

"Me thogt I shewed man luf when I made him to be
All angels abuf".

The commission and plans for the building of the ark are received by Noah with wonder and thanksgiving, but almost immediately the thought of what his wife will say comes to trouble him:

"I am agast that we get som fray
Betwixt us both;
ffor she is full techee,
ffor litill oft angre,
If any-thyng wrong be,
Soyne is she wroth".

His apprehensions being amply realized, he suddenly remembers that he has urgent business elsewhere. So, stopping short in the midst of the scuffle, and bidding his wife pray for him during his absence,

he leaves her ignorant of all that is to come. Setting to work Noah laments the weakness of his great age:

"A! my bak, I trow, will brast! this is a sory note!
Hit is wonder that I last, sich an old dote
All dold!
To begyn sich a work,
My bonys ar so stark,
No wonder if thay work,
ffor I am full old".

But when the work is finished, he declares:

"It is better wroght
Then I coude haif thoght.
Him that maide all of noght
I thank oonly!.
Now will I hy me, and no-thyng be leder,
My wife and my meneye to bryng even heder".

Having told his wife of the awful destruction that is to come upon the earth, he urges that the shelter of the ark be sought immediately. Excited and alarmed, she commences to pack up the household belongings, assisted by her three sons,--the most active of whom seems to be 'Brother Sam'. But alas upon entering the ark, she takes it exceedingly ill that she should be expected to sail in so outlandish a craft:

"I was never bard ere, as ever myght I the,
In sich an oostre as this.
In faith, I cannot fynd,
Which is before, which is behynd".

And leaving the ark, she stations herself on the hilltop, and commences to spin. With almost incredible obstinacy, she resists all

Noah's entreaties and commands, until the waters come creeping up around her feet. Terrified in sober earnest now, she rushes wildl into the ark, where her indignant husband welcomes her with a severe flogging. Instead of asking for mercy, she calls him names, Wat Wyn and Nicholl Nedy, and they fall to it roundly, only desisting when Noah's "bak is nere in two", and his wife is "bet blo". The sons now interfere and end the quarrel, which seems to have cleared the air; during the remainder of the play, Noah and his wife seem to hold each other in wholesome respect. We have here, then, the beginning of comedy: one simple dramatic motive, the altercation between husband and wife. This common farce-theme, comedy turning on physical discomfiture, appeals through the physical senses to the lowest form of comic sense. The conception of Noah's wife here, is characteristically English. The play abounds in local color, particularly in the farce scenes; thus, in the earlier part of the play, Noah's wife says of her husband:

"Bot thou were worthi be cled in Stafford blew:
ffor thou art alway adred, be it fals or trew".

There is no mention of the rainbow in this play, but the floods diminish, until

"Ther is left right none, and that be ye bold.
As still as a stone oure ship is stold".

With great rejoicing, the little company prepares to leave the ark:

"Apon land here anone that we were, fayn I wold.
My childer dere,
Sem, Japhet, and Cam,
With gle and with gam,
Com go we all sam,
We will no longer abide here".

Then speaking in awe-struck tones of the "proudist of pryde" who "to dede ar dyght", Noah beseeches God

"In heven hye with his to purvaye us a place,
That we,
With his santis in sight,
And his angels bright,
May com to his light:
Amen for charite".

Although the Chester Cycle as a whole is less popular in character than the York and Towneley cycles, there is an originality of treatment in the Chester Flood Play that places it among the most spirited and amusing of all the English Mysteries. There is an attempt at localized individualization of all the characters. The entire household seems to be present with Noah, and all hear God's warning and commands. The patriarch is not called upon here, as in the other plays, to undertake a centure-long solitary task; but each member of the household, in proportion to his strength and skill, shares in the mighty work. There is no mention of old age or weakness, or trace of hesitancy, on Noah's part. The work is undertaken in the most cheerful, matter-of-fact manner imaginable. Sem brings an axe, "As sharp as anye in all this towne"; Cam has "a hacchatt wounder keeyne"; and Jaffette announces with great satisfaction,

"I can make well a pynne,
And with this hamer knocke it in".

Semes Wiffe provides a hacckinge stoccke, warranted to stand any amount of hewing and knocking; Cammes Wiffe goes to "gaither slyche, The shippe for to caulke and pyche"; Jaffettes Wiffe picks up "chippes to make a fier" for dinner; and even Noah's wife although

"Wemen be weeke to underfoe
Anye greate travill,"

condescends to "bringe tymber". Then Noah begins the "pynning of bordes togeither, making the maste of a treey,

"Tyed with cabbelles that will laste,
With a saile yarde for iche blaste,
And iche thinge in their kinde:
With toppe-castill, and boe-spritte,

Bouthe cordes and roppes I have all mette,
To sayle fourth at the nexte weete".

And presto ! the "shyppe is at an ende". The humorous treatment of Noah's wife and her attitude toward her husband, is suggestive of the York play. The motive,--her reluctance to leave her old friends,--first noted in the York play, appears here with heightened dramatic effect. Meanwhile, God having appeared to Noah the second time, the ark is made ready for the reception of the animals; then Noah, with all his family, except his wife, entering the ark, boards are placed about it, upon which the beasts and fowls are painted. To add to the illusion, a list of the animals is given. Now everything is made ready, but still Noah's Wife will not go without her gossippes:

"But thou lett them into thy cheiste,
Elles rowe nowe whor thy leiste,
And gette thee a newe wiffe".

While her sons are planning to bringe her in whether she will or no, the gossippes gather round her, and together they drink and sing for the last time,

"The flude comes flittinge in full faste,
One everye syde that spreades full faire;
For feare of drowninge I am agaste;
Good gossippes, lett us drawe nere.
And lett us drinke or we departe,
For ofte tymes we have done soe;
For att a drought thou drinkes a quarte,
And soe will I doe or I goe.
Heare is a pottill full of Malmsine good and stronge;
Itt will rejoyce bouth harte and tonge;

Though Noye thinke us never so longe,

Heare we will drinke alike".

Finding all attempts to persuade her but a waste of time, the sons carry their mother bodily into the ark. Unfortunately, Noah gives expression to his relief by bidding his wife "welckome into this botte", whereupon she replies to his courtesy with a vigorous cuff; and poor Noah, turning away in ruefull discomfiture, murmurs,

"Ha, ha! marye, this is hotte!

It is good for to be still".

The ark now begins to move, and Noah closes the window, and is silent "for a littil' space, and afterwarde lokinge rounde aboute", he calls upon God to accept the sacrifice he offers in his honor. God now appears for the third time, blesses Noah and his household, and covenantes to set his bow of promise in the heavens:

"Wher cloudes in the welckine bene,

That same bow shal be seene,

In tocken that my wrath and teene

Shall never this wrocken be.

The string is torned towardes you,

And towarde me is bente the bowe,

That suche weither shall never shewe,

This behighte I thee.

For vengeance shall noe more appeare,

And nowe fare well, my darlinge deare".

In the Hegge Plays, we find a marked change in treatment. The old charm of the popular comic effect, with its touches of local color, its honest rustic simplicity, and effective contrast, has been replaced by a sober faithfulness of adherence to Biblical sources, and a plain, careful seriousness of tone almost amounting to rigidity. There is the inevitable expository prolog, in which Noah, sorrowing over the great sinfulness of men, prays for the blessing of the Omnipotent:

"Thy servauntes save, Lord, fro synful sounde,
In wyl, in werk, in dede, and in thought:
Oure welth in woo lete nevyr be founde,
Us help, Lord, from synne that we be in brought,
Lord God fful of myght "

Then follows a formal self-presentation of the different members of the patriarch's household, each of whom declares his entire allegiance to divine power. The effect is extremely wooden and undramatical. Then God, declaring that this world, whose sin so sorely grieves him, shall be destroyed, sends his angel to Noah:

"A shypp to take on hond to ton
Thou byd hym swythe ffor hym and his,
ffrom drynchyng hem to save".

As in the York play, Noah shows reluctance to undertake the task, pleading both his age and his unskillfulness:

"How xuld I have wytt a shypp for to make,
I am of ryght grett age, v. c. ere olde,
It is not for me this werk to undyrtake,
ffor ffeythnnesse of age my leggys gyn ffolde".

But upon the angel's assurrance,

"God xal enforme thee and rewle the ful ryght",

Noah announces his intention of setting to work immediately:

"Alas that ffor synne it xal so betydde,
That vengeanns of flood xal werke this manase,
God is sore grevyd with oure grett tresspas,
That with wylde watyr the werk xal be dreynte,
A shypp for to make now lete us hens pas,
That God a ȝens us of synne have no compleynt".

And then there is an abrupt break in the play, caused by the insertion of a most curious episode. Lameth, the blind archer, comes upon the stage and introduces himself, calling upon the boy who leads him, to bear witness of his former great skill as a marksman. In proof that his prowess has not yet deserted him, the youth directs his aim toward what appears to be a wild beast, lurking in the bushes. And the archer, letting fly his "brod arme", shoots Cain through the heart. Remembering the curse resting on the slayer of Cain, in his wild anger Lameth beats out the brains of the boy who so fatally guided his arm, and then flees in desolation before the wrath of God.

The only explanation that offers for the introduction here of this incident, seems to be the strong dramatic contrast between Lameth --representing, by his double murder, the unrepentant sinfulness of the world,--and Noah, "the man just and perfect in his generation".

Meanwhile, Noah with all his household having taken refuge in the ark, the floods have gathered upon the face of the earth. As in the opening of the play, each character invoked God's blessing, so now, led by Noah, each in turn bewails the common distress, and shows thankfulness for his own salvation. At last the waters give signs of decreasing, and Noah sends forth first the crow, and then

the dove, to fly "ovyr these waterys wete,

And espye afftere sum drye lond,"

When the dove returns with the "grett olyve bushe", all join in singing:

"Mare vidit et fugit,

Jordanis conversus est retrorsum.

Non nobis, Domine, non nobis.

Sed nomini tuo da gloriam."

Of the Newcastle-on-Tyne series of sixteen plays, 'The Shipwrights ancient Play of Noah's Ark' is the only one that has come down to us. Written in no very elevated vein, the farce-comedy effect is heightened by a striking folk-element in the introduction of Deabolus, a personage in whom the medieval audience took great delight. The prolog is spoken by Deus, who nevertheless sends his angel to warn Noah, and to give him directions for the building of the ark. The angel finds Noah sleeping:

"Waken, Noah, and to me take tent!
Noah, but if thou hear this thing,
Ever, whilst thou live, thou shall repent".

To which the patriarch, in no gentle humor at being so peremtorily aroused, makes answer:

"What art thou, for heaven's king,
(Away forth with I would thou went)
That wakens Noah off his sleeping?"

But the angel, not to be rebuffed, proceeds to give him the dimensions for the ark:

"And in her side thou shear a door
With fenesters full fitly fest".

There is full cause that God should be wroth with the world:

"For ever-ilk wight forwarks him wild,
And many are soiled in sinne's seir
And in felony fowly filed".

Noah still grumbles, though he needs must attempt the task:

"I am a man no worth at need,
For I am six hundred winters eld.
Unlusty I am to do such a deed,
For I have neither ruff nor ryff,

Nor spyer nor sprind, nor sprout nor sprot.
Christ be the shaper of this ship,
For now a ship needs make I not,
Ever wo worth thou fouled sin,
For all too dear thou must be bought "

No sooner has he gone about his work, than Deabolus comes on the scene, rejoicing with fiendish glee that "ther has been non alive, man, beast, child or wife", who are not in his power. News has reached him, however, of

"A ship that made shou'd be,
For to save withowten nay
Noah and his meenye".

And so he has come to trouble them:

"To Noah's wife wil' I wend,
Gare her believe in me;
In faith, she is my friend,
She is both whaint and slee".

Appearing then before her, he greets her with much ceremony, and she, highly flattered, bids him welcome, and demands his name. And here Deabolus puts on an air of profound mystery, and makes answer:

"To tell my name I were full laith--
I come to warn thee of thy skaith;
I tell thee secretly:
And thou do after thy husband's read,
Thou and thy children will be dead,
And that right hastily".

Her first impulse is to rebuke him:

"Go, devil, how say? for shame "

But he works on her credulity, and offers to give her a magic potion

which will cause her husband to tell all his secrets. The inducement is so tempting, that she yields. When 'tis evening, Noah plods slowly homeward, his "weary bones for to rest". In answer to his greeting, his wife receives him with unusual gentleness:

"Welcome, Noah,as might I thee,
Welcome to thine own wayns
Sit down beside me here...
Thou has full weary baynes.
Have eaten, Noah, as might I thee,
And soon a drink I shal give thee,
Such drunk thou never afore".

And Noah, overcome by the potent drink--suspiciously suggestive of the fruit of the vine,--yields to his wife's insistence:

"O yes, dame, could thou stint,
I would thee tell my wit,
How God an angel sent,
And bad me make a ship".

His wife immediately flies into a passion, and abuses him roundly:

"Who, devil, made thee a wright,
(God give him ill to fayre)...
Men should have heard wide where,
When you began to smite...

To Noah's frightened remonstrances,she answers:

"The devil of hell thee speed,
To ship when thou shalt go!"

Noah now invokes God's aid, and an angel comes to his rescue. And Noah, finishing his work in peace, declares:

"Now home then will I fare
To fetch in my money,

Have good day, both less and mare,

My blessing with you be!"

Whereupon Deabolus, defeated in his naive intention of accompanying Noah's wife on the ark, pronounces direful curses on all in the audience who will not swear allegiance to him:

"I pray to Dolphin, prince of dead...

He scald you all within his lead,

That none of you may thrive nor thee!"

The Isaac Plays.

The treatment of the Abraham pageant in the York Cycle does not follow the usual convention, depending upon the childish helplessness of Isaac for its chief dramatic effect; but rather there is an attempt here to increase the pathos by representing Isaac as a man of thirty years and more. Abraham opens the play with the customary prolog-speech, in which he reviews his past history, and speaks of his great love for Isaac. Then an angel comes to him with a message from God, to the effect that he offer up his son as a sacrifice upon the Mount of Vision. Abraham meditates long over this strange command, but never-the-less makes ready to go to the place indicated:

"þat is hythyn thre daies iornay,
The ganest gate þat i gane goo."

Without explaining his real purpose to Isaac, he bids his son go with him. And on the way, the troubled father, who would fain give his own life to save his son, says wistfully:

"Sone, yf oure lord god almighty,
Of my selfe walde have his offerande,
I wolde be glade for hym to dye,
For all oure heele hyngis in his hande."

And Isaac, who has not the slightest suspicion of what lies before him, cheerfully expresses his own willingness to serve God even to the uttermost:

"Fadir, for suth ryght so walde I,
Lever þan lange to leve in lande,"

Then leaving the servants who had accompanied them at the foot of the Mount, Abraham leads the way to the appointed place. But Isaac, who has brought the wood for the fire, now for the first time notices that they have not provided the sacrifice. The father at first

evades the question, but at last is forced to answer:

"Sertis, sone, I may no lenger layne,
Thy-selfe shulde bide þat bittir brayde".

There is something unnatural in Isaac's perfect composure, and in the meekness with which he accepts his doom:

"Why; Fadir, will god þat I be slayne?...
I sall noght grouche þer agayne,
To wirke his wille I am wele payed;
Sen it is his desire,
I sall be bayne to be
Brittynd and brent in fyre,
And þer-fore morne noght for me".

Abraham continues steadfast in his purpose to do God's will at whatever cost. The terrible conflict between this determination and his great love for his son, first shown in the prayer offered upon reaching the mount, finds voice again when Isaac is bound for the sacrifice:

"This is to me a perles pyne,
To se myn nawe dere childe þus boune!"

And kissing him, he bids him

"Fare-well, for anes and ay."

Isaac, having asked for his father's blessing, implores him to delay no longer. And with the tears raining down his cheeks, Abraham makes ready to finish the task. Here at last Isaac's heart almost fails him, and there falls from his lips the bitter cry:

"A! dere fadir, lyff is full swete".

Then bidding his father lay a kerchief over his eyes, he awaits the final blow. But lo, an angel appears to stay the father's arm, with the wondrous glad tidings that God has sent a sheep to be of-

fered in Isaac's stead. And father and son unite in joyful thanksgiving for this great deliverance. But as they descend the mount, there is an almost ludicrous anti-climax when Isaac, commanded by his father to wed

"Rabek þat damysell,
Hir fayrer is none",

accepts this decree with the same meek resignation he showed at the sacrificial alter.

The Towneley Abraham play, although somewhat discursive in treatment and without much beauty of poetic form, yet possesses a homely attractiveness through its simplicity. In this it differs widely from the Brome play: there is no such virtuous resignation on the part of Isaac; but instead he fights for his life to the end. In the main, however, the conventional treatment prevails.

The dramatist takes advantage of Abraham's prolog-speech to review all that has taken place in the world since the creation, and a peculiar twist is given to God's motive in testing the fidelity of his servant: Abraham, musing over the fate of those who had gone before, whom he declares have all been consigned to hell until such time as God may see fit to release them, is longing for his own time to come--although, unless God vouchsafes some special intervention, he cannot h ope to fare better than they. And so it is that God, having compassion upon the troubled thoughts of Abraham, contrives a plan to help him out of this difficulty. He will make test of Abraham's constancy, and according to the outcome shall be his fate. But so completely is the patriarch engrossed in his revery, that when God calls him he is not sure that he has heard aright, and peering about him in uncertainty, he mutters:

"Who is that? war! let me se!
I herd oone neven my name".

He receives the divine command inall simplicity, and cheerfully promises to obey. But after God has left him, he admits to himself his growing realization of the grievousness of this task imposed upon him:

"This commaundement must I nedis fulfill,
If that my hert wax hevy as leyde.

---

wist Isaac, wher so he were,
he wold be abast now,
how that he is in dangere".

So he turns to call the child, and there follows between them a charming love-scene; but the thought of what must come weighs heavily on the father's heart, and he finds a pretext for sending Isaac with a message to his mother, in order that he may be alone with his grief, while he makes the necessary provisions for the sad journey. Then he bids Isaac make ready to go with him:

"We two must now weynd furth of towne,
In far country to sacrifie;

Bi hillys and dayllys, both vp & downe,
Son thou shal ride and I will go bi".

Isaac is soon ready, and as they go forth Abraham, fearing lest his dark purpose be discovered, promises a joyful return:

"My dere son, look thou have no drede,
We shal com home with grete lovyng;
Both to and fro I shal vs lede;
Com now, son, in my blyssyng".

As they draw near the hill, Abraham leaves there the servants;

"Ye two here with this asse abide,
ffor Isaac & I will to yond hill;
It is so hie we may not ride;
Therfor ye two shal abide here still".

And so bidding them an affectionate farewell, Abraham and Isaac climb the hill together; and now at last comes the long-dreaded question:

"Where is the beest that should be brend?"

There is no explaining to the child that it is God's will--he would not understand. And so violently suppressing his feelings, mindful only of the unalterable necessity, the bewildered father seeks to end the business in the shortest way:

"Now, son, I may no longer layn.
Sich will is into myne hart went;
Thou was ever to me full bayn
Ever to fulfill myn entent".

So begins the conflict between father and son, and the strife in the father's heart. The dialog which follows, is terse, dramatic, intense. In vain Isaac pleads for mercy; not even for his mother's sake can he move his father to change his purpose. But at last, almost unmanned by his conflicting emotions, Abraham turns away blinded by tears. Then he nerves himself to rush suddenly forward and slay his son, when suddenly an angel appears to bid him stay his hand. But Abraham is afraid to believe the good tidings, and views both message and messenger with suspicion. It is only by repeated assurances that the angel finally succeeds in convincing him that it is indeed God's present command that Isaac be not harmed. Then the joy of the father is beyond all measure:

"To speke with the have I no space,
With my dere son till I have spokyn.
My good son, thou shal have grace,
On the now will I not be wrokyn;
Ryse vp now, with thy frely face".

Then as father and son come to each other in loving embrace, the child again speaks of his terror:

"ffor ferd, sir, was I nere-hand mad".

As to how the play ended, we can only conjecture, as two leaves of the manuscript are wanting here.

In the Chester sequence, the Isaac play forms the latter part of a combination of two plays in one, under the title of "The Histories of Lot and Abraham". The treatment of the theme suggests that of the Brome play, in that it lays great emphasis upon Isaac's love for his mother. Instead of the intervention of an angelic messenger, God appears directly to Abraham :

"Take Isaake, thy sonne by name,
That thou loveste the beste of all,
And in sacrifice offer hym to me
Uppon that hyll their besides thee.
Abraham, I will that it be soe,
For oughte that maye befalle."

The latter replies in the same simple, direct manner, that he will heartily fulfill God's commandment; and then turning to his son, he says:

"Make thee readye, my deare darlinge,
For we must doe a littill thinge".

And so the two set out together, the father carrying the sword and the fire, and the child carrying the bundle of wood. But when they reach the appointed place, Abraham's heart fails him, and in bitter distress he "leiftes up his handes, and saith fowlowinge:

Ho! my harte will breake in three,

As thou wylte, Lorde, so muste yt be,
To thee I wilbe bayne".

Then tenderly to the child:

"Laye downe thy faggote, my owne sonne deare".

Isaac, perplexed by his father's troubled face, now seeks to learn the cause of his sorrow; and noting, for the first time, that there

is to be seen no animal for the sacrifice, he, too, begins to be anxious. But when his father admits that there is no beast provided, at once the child grows apprehensive:

"Father, I am full sore afreade
To see you beare that drawne sorde;
I hope for all my myddell yarde
You will not slaye your childe".

Abraham would reassure him, by telling him that God will send

"Some manner of beaste into this feilde,
Either tame or wilde".

But the child, missing the note of sincerity in his father's voice, simply repeats his question:

"Father, tell me or I goe
Wheither I shal be harmede or noe".

Nor will he give over his questioning, though Abraham implores him to do so. At last in utter desperation, the father forces himself to speak the awful words:

"Ah!Isaake, Isaake, I muste thee kille!"

The scene that follows is very similar to the corresponding portion of the Brome play: Isaac pleads for his life urging his own childish helplessness, and his mother's great love for him: and when told that it is God's decree, he shows the same touching spirit of meek submission. The heart-broken father cries out in his woe:

"Ho!Isaake, Isaake, blessed muste thou be!
Allmoste my witte I lose for thee;
The blood of thy bodye so freey,
I am full lothe to sheede."

Whereupon the child makes answer plaintively:

"Father, seing you muste nedes doe soe,

Let it passe lightlie, and over goe."

And then, again:

"Seithen I muste dye the death to daie,
As few strockes you well maie,
When you smyte of my heade."

At last, tried beyond his strength by the delay, he adds:

"Nowe, trewlye, father, this talkinge
Doth but make longe taryeinge.
I praye you, come and make endinge,
And let me hense be gone."

Then Abraham, binding him, lays him upon the altar: but still Isaac keeps talking, as though to keep up his courage by the sound of his own voice:

"Father, we muste no more mete,
Be oughte that I maie see;

Father, greete well my brethren yonge,
And praye my mother of her blessinge,
I come noe more under her wynge,
Fare well for ever and aye."

Abraham, however, still delays:

"Lorde, I woulde fayne worke thy will,
This yonge innocente that lieth so still
Full loth were me hym to kille,
By anye maner a waye."

At the last, nerved by the knowledge that the deed must be done, Abraham lifts his sword: and straightway the angels of the Lord appear unto Abraham, bidding him stay his hand, and pronouncing upon him the benediction of the Most High. And when Abraham has offered

in sacrifice the ram which they have provided, God comes in person to repeat his promise. An expositor follows with the usual moral application and interpretation, and therewith the play ends.

In the Hegge Plays, the treatment of the Isaac play follows a different plan. There is no high, tragic climax, no strong conflict between love and duty. Isaac seems more mature than in the Brome play, and his words are precise almost to stiltedness. He shows no fear, but rather declares himself glad to die in the fulfilment of God's will. Abraham's lamentations are conventional and almost colorless. In spite, however, of the prosaic purpose of the dramatist, a few touches of real feeling have crept in. Thus Abraham says:

"The wylle of God must nedys be done!
To werke his wylle I seyd nevyr nay;
But ȝit the ffadyr to sle the sone,
My hert doth clynge and cleve as clay."

The coming of the angel to stay the sword, falls somewhat flat--as there is no great tension to be relieved. By a strange oversight,, no explanation is offered of the sudden appearance of the sheep on the Mount Without the slightest preparation, Abraham suddenly announces:

"In sacrifice here or I hence pace,
I sle this shepe with this same knyff."

Dutifully expressing his thanks, the patriarch in all calmness, and with a matter-of-course air, listens to the divine promise:

"As sterres in hevyn byn many and fele,
So xal thi seed encrese and growe."

The father and son kneel and continue their thanksgiving; then rise, and cheerfully set forth on their homeward way. The scene closes with Abraham's concluding petition:

"As althyng, Lord, thou hast in honde,
So save us all, wher so we be."

The Brome Isaac play is perhaps the most successful treatment of the more serious miracle-theme. The choice of this best dramatic material for separate treatment, is in itself significant. There is a power of imagination, sympathy and truth in the characterization not to be found elsewhere, even in the other versions of the same story. The play of emotions is more varied, the conflict between fatherly love and unswerving obedience to divine command, is more intensely tragic.

Abraham's opening speech forms an exceedingly effective introduction: it sounds the key-note, suggests the atmosphere, and gives the pathetic coloring of the play. Here, Isaac is skilfully kept in the back ground. When God sends his angel to bid Abraham offer his son Isaac upon the altar of sacrifice, His words show His perfect confidence in Abraham's faithfulness. It is not to convince Himself, that He would thus make trial of His servant, but for a great, far-reaching purpose:

"All men shall take exampyll be hym
My commawmentes how they schall kepe".

And then before the angel appears, something of the tenderness of the relation between father and son is revealed. But when the dread command is made known, Abraham does not falter, though his fatherly heart is rent with anguish:

"Wolle-com to me be my Lordes sond,
And hys hest I will not with-stond:
3yt Ysaac, my 3owng sonne in lond,
A full dere chyld to me have byn.

I lovyd never thyng soo mych in erde,
And now I mvst the chyld goo kyll.

A! Lord God, my conseons ys stronly steryd,
And ȝyt, my dere Lord, I am sore a-ferd
To groche ony thyng a-ȝen ȝowr wyll".

So the angel departs, and Abraham turns in haste to summon his son. The pure innocence of the child as he leaves his "preyrys to the Trenyte", to do his father's bidding, is beautifully set forth in the dialog. And Abraham, striving to avoid all appearance of agitation, takes up the vessel of glowing coals, and gives Isaac the bundle of sticks to carry. They start on their way, the father's heart burdened to breaking by the boy's gentle words. But they needs must make haste, and to Abraham's urging Isaac replies, with an exquisitely unconscious touch of pathos:

"Go we, my dere fader, as fast as I may;
To folow ȝow I am full fayn
All-thow I be slendyr".

And Abraham, smitten to the heart, turns aside his face, lest the child should see and understand:

"A! Lord, my hart brekyth on tweyn,
Thys chyldes wordes, they be so tender".

They reach the Mount, and Isaac laying the wood on the ground, and quickly turning to his father for the proud smile of loving approval that he has never failed to receive, is filled with sorrowful wonder at the mingled grief and stern determination in his face,--a wonder that turns to terror as he notes for the first time that no animal has been provided for the sacrifice. To his frightened questions, he receives only evasive answers. And then--his eyes fall upon the naked sword in his father's hand; and the trembling child, unable longer to endure the suspense, gives utterance to the wild fear at his heart:

"ȝa, fader, but my hart begynnyth to quake,
To se that scharpe sword in ȝowr hond.

Tell me, my dere fader, or that ȝe ses,
Ber ȝe ȝowr sword drawyn for me?"

But Abraham, overwhelmed with woe, can not yet bring himself to say the fatal words. And the child, pleading that he may know the truth, and yet with wistful sympathy for this strange grief of his father's, against which even his love may not avail, tries once more:

"Dere fader, I prey ȝow, hyd yt not fro me,
But sum of ȝowr thowt that ȝe tell me."

And Abraham with uncontrolable anguish, yields to his entreaties:

"A! Ysaac, Ysaac, I must kyll the!"

The boy stands there, alone, with his terrible fate staring him in the face, and, shaken with grief and ready to sink with terror, he begins to plead for his life:

"Kyll me, fader? alasse! wat have I done?
Yff I have trespassyd a- ens ow owt,
With a ȝard ȝe may make me full myld;
And with ȝowr scharp sword kyll me nogth,
For i-wys, fader, I am but a chyld".

But the father dares not let his purpose weaken. Then the child makes his last appeal, every word of which is added torture to the heart-broken father:

"Now I wold to God my moder were her on this hyll!
Sche woold knele for me on both hyr kneys
To save my lyffe.
And sythen that my moder ys not here,
I prey ȝow, fader, schong ȝowr chere,

And kyll me not with ȝowyr knyffe".

Abraham no sooner tells him that this terrible decree is from God, than Isaac ceases all resistance:

"Now, fader, aȝens my Lordes wyll
I wyll never groche, lowd nor styll;
He mygth a sent me a better desteny,
Yf yt had a be hys plecer."

This meek resignation, however, and the wistful request that his mother may not know of his fate, are far harder for the father to withstand than all that has gone before. The boy goes on talking, now sending his last goodbye to his mother, and then reverting to his fear of the sharp sword, and asking to have a cloth laid over his eyes, that he may not see it. But he is not content to be bound for the sacrifice. At last, he tries to lessen his father's grief:

"I prey ȝow, fader, make ȝe no woo,
For, be I onys ded and fro ȝow goo,
I schall be sone owt of ȝowr mynd.

Ther-for doo owr Lordes byddyng,
And wan I am ded, than prey for me;
But, good fader, tell ȝe my moder no-thyng,
Say that I am in a-nother cuntre dwellyng."

Then asking for his father's blessing, Isaac requests that there be no more delay. But motives for delaying this terrible scene, on which the main interest of the whole drama depends, are constantly recurring. The father, tossed in a perfect tempest of emotions, can not yet find it in his heart to finish the work, and each new request from Isaac serves to prolong the suspense. At last, the child's eyes are covered and Abraham makes ready for the final stroke.

Isaac prays to God to receive his spirit, and again urges his father to make no tarrying. And then at the crucial moment, as Abraham raises his sword to strike, the angel appears to stay his hand. He announces God's great pleasure in Abraham's faithfulness in "the kepyng of hys commawment", and brings a ram for the sacrifice:

"He standeth teyed, loo! a-mong the breres.
Now, Abraham, amend thy mood,
For Ysaac, thy ȝowng son that her ys,
Thys day schall not sched hys blood."

And Abraham, in a transport of thanksgiving, cries:

"A-rysse vp, Ysaac, my dere sunne, a-rysse;
A-rysse vp, swete chyld, and cum to me."

The boy at first can not realize the glad tidings:

"A! fader, full glad than wer I,
I-wys, fader, I sey, i-wys,
Yf thys tale were trew."

Only after the ram is pointed out to him, does his fear of displeasing God begin to weaken. As he leads the ram to the altar, Isaac's joy breaks forth:

"A! scheppe, scheppe, blyssyd mot thou be,
That ever thow were sent down heder!
Thow schall thys day dey for me,
In the worchup of the holy Trynyte.

Thow thou be neuer so jentyll and good,
ȝyt had I lever thow schedyst thi blood,
I-wysse, scheppe, than I,

Lord God, I thanke the with all my hart,

For I am glad that I schall leve
And kys onys my dere moder."

But again, as he stoops down to blow the fire, Isaac lifts his eyes apprehensively to his father:

"But, fader, wyll I stowppe downe lowe,
3e will not kyll me with 3owr sword, I trowe?"

Reassuring him of his perfect safety, Abraham makes his offering to God, and kneeling, awaits His blessing. And God speaks from above, declaring that because of this deed the seed of Abraham shall be multiplied

"As thyke as sterres be in the skye."

With glad hearts and great thankfulness, father and son turn to descend the Mount, and on the way, Isaac declares that because of his sore fright this day, he will never-more of his own free will revisit the place. The father, too, is most anxious to be safely at home again, and to this Isaac heartily assents:

"Be my feyth, fader, ther-to I grant,
I had never so good wyll to gon hom,
And to speke with my dere moder."

At the close of the play, a Doctor enters to speak the epilog, in the old medieval-sermon spirit. But so finely has the dramatist traced the painful crisis, with its happy issue, that even this prosaic anti-climax of moralization can not detract from the effect of the play. Nor does the crudity of style and meter lessen the power of the tragic situation, with its changing light and shadow, which the poet has here presented, with so masterly, yet so loving, a touch.

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